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On the Difficulties of Writing Philosophy from a Racialized Subjectivity

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with a job or obtain tenure!). Unless one actively resists and consciously tries to keep sight of who they are while philosophizing—which means being true to one’s interests, writing on topics that they find fascinating (regardless of their disciplinary uptake), and relying upon ways of knowing informed by the particularities of human identity, to say the least—professionalized philosophy has a tendency to disembody its practitioners. It can, as Kurt Cobain sings, “beat me out of me.” This disembodiment is strange since most philosophy, especially since Socrates, begins under the banner of “know thy self.” How are we to understand this “self” that philosophy ask us to know, when, for many, any attempt at using *logos* to think about *ethnos* results in nonphilosophy? Ultimately, as I suggest, the act of writing philosophy often amounts to a sleight of hand, one resulting in the alienation, estrangement, and eventual replacement of one sense of self with another that may not really be you.

Contrary to this, I suggest that you be yourself in professional philosophy, especially if you are a racial or ethnic minority. Note, however, that this suggestion does not imply that one is (nor should they be) altogether defined by their gender, race, or ethnicity in terms of their ability to think. While there remains something to be said about the inability of controlling how one’s colleagues or society at large views you, that is, the inescapability of a racialized existence, to demand that all philosophers who happen to be of “minority” status think in essentialized ways that correspond with race and/or gender would be an injustice and quite the totalizing experience. Such a strong stance would deny many philosophers their status as philosopher plain and simple (not a “Black,” “Latinx,” or what-have-you philosopher). For that reason, my suggestion aims at those who hold that one’s race or ethnic identity is completely irrelevant or out of place in philosophy; it is aimed at those who would devalue the epistemic importance of race, ethnicity, or gender altogether.

In order to give shape to this line of thought, I ask the following question: What does philosophy have to do with you? Or, perhaps more precisely, what do you have to do with philosophy? Such a question routinely kick-starts my Latin American philosophy course. It is a question that students (both undergraduate and graduate) often have a hard time answering, regardless of their ethnic or racial background, sexuality, or gender. It is also one that philosophers do not ask enough (or at all for that matter). I start my course in this way because, as I see it, whatever “Latin American” or “Latinx” philosophy might be, it is part of the embodiment of philosophy, a movement (for lack of a better word) that has found new meaning in professional philosophy and is part of a process that says *who* you are matters philosophically.

To call oneself a “Latin American philosopher,” or, perhaps more specifically, to philosophize from a Latin American or Latinx standpoint, is to affirm the importance of one’s *Latinidad*—whatever that might mean—while doing philosophy. This is quite the political statement in mainstream academic philosophy. In a discipline that has for the most part been dominated by white males, both thematically and methodologically, to think from a

ARTICLES

On the Difficulties of Writing Philosophy from a Racialized Subjectivity

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This essay is about the loss of voice.¹ It is about the ways in which the act of writing philosophy often results in an alienating and existentially meaningless experience for many budding philosophers, particularly those who wish to think *from* their racialized and gendered identities in professional academic philosophy (and still come out

nonwhite or nonmale perspective grates against the grain of much professional academic philosophy. Moreover, to regard one's Latinidad as a site for knowledge-construction and/or philosophical analysis is to ascribe epistemic value to race or gender or the intersection of these (and more). *How* you know is impacted by *who* you are. Charles Mills puts it best when he writes that because of the centrality of whiteness to professional philosophy's self-conception, a point I explain below, those wishing to think from nonwhite perspectives are "challenging philosophy in a way that Black scholars in other areas are not challenging theirs."² Not only *should* philosophers embrace this challenge, but if philosophy is to thrive today, attract more students from a variety of backgrounds, and survive in higher education, it *must*. Problem is, many would rather sink the ship than keep it afloat.

DISEMBODIED PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

The disembodiment of philosophy comes from certain methodological constraints, metaphilosophical commitments, and normative ideals about the end goal of philosophical thought. When first introducing philosophy to students unfamiliar with it, professors and instructors oftentimes fall back upon the transliteration of the Greek work *philosophia* as the "love of wisdom." Given the meaning of the particles *philo* and *sophia*, these professors and instructors are not wrong when reducing philosophy to such an easily digestible cliché (I, too, am guilty of reaching for this formula when I am having a hard time explaining what philosophy is and what philosophers do). Nevertheless, as I argue below, to think of philosophy as merely the love of wisdom is an impoverishment and understatement. First off, most people understand being wise as synonymous with being knowledgeable, and knowledge is not necessarily the same as wisdom. I can know a great deal; that does not make me wise. Wisdom is critical insight or a disposition towards knowing/knowledge that may accompany the state of being knowledgeable, but it also might not. Socrates purported to know nothing or very little but was said to be wise. Loving wisdom does not mean a collection of facts. Second, the loving of wisdom was never meant to be an end in itself; no one loves wisdom simply for the sake of loving wisdom (that would be weird). Philosophers aspire after wisdom because it frees one from obscurantism, ignorance, dogma, falsehood, and various forms of ideology and false-consciousness that support social and political institutions (many of which happen to be unjust). Thus, there is an inherent liberatory quality to philosophy, as Ignacio Ellacuría put it (again, see below), one that extends all the way to Western academic understandings of the origins of this field.

Philosophy is also often described as the universal science of thought, a rigorous and critical examination of "how things in the broadest sense of the term hang together in the broadest sense of the term," to use the famous quote by Wilfred Sellars. Here, philosophy is the province of "big questions." While a precise definition might be untenable, most philosophers agree that their discipline asks important questions about life, death, right, wrong, good and bad, the existence of God, the nature of religious belief, the extent of human knowledge, the meaning of life, and a whole lot more. In order to ask "big questions," however, one has

to achieve sufficient discursive breadth, that is, a way of speaking, thinking, and writing that places you on the same page as the great thinkers of history, e.g., Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, and others. From this perspective, the practice of philosophy requires that we think in a way that transcends human difference, in a way that arises above the particularities of our individual or collective historical and cultural contexts such that our thoughts speak across the ages and ask questions pertaining to all of humanity, not just our individual self or subset of humanity.

The problem with such a conception of philosophy is that in being asked to write, speak, and think in a way that spans space and time, students of philosophy are often forced to downplay or drop those aspects of their selves that tend to be rather meaningful on individual (and collective) levels. Worse, since achieving the widest discursive breadth possible often comes by finding a common (read "universal") ground, budding philosophers are often forced to speak in terms articulated by those of the dominant perspective(s). This is the particular knot that I wish readers think to about: the downplaying of racial or ethnic difference and the simultaneous embracement of a supposed "race-less" disembodied voice.

In "Philosophy Raced, Philosophy Erased," Mills identifies the pervasive whiteness of professionalized philosophy as the root of this problem.³ As he explains, philosophers of color face an assortment of challenges upon entering the ranks of professional philosophy. Some of these include implicit and explicit racial/gender biases, microaggressions, double standards, forms of tokenization, and outright hostility or animosity. All of these, unfortunately, have come to be expected by racialized minorities entering academic philosophy (which does not make them right). Professional philosophers can rectify the above if the political will and various administrative and institutional support mechanisms are in place. Sadly, both tend to be lacking (but that is a different matter). The most perplexing and unique challenge faced by philosophers of color, Mills continues, is the relegation of the types of interpersonal, structural, and historical issues faced by racialized minorities to the status of "nonphilosophy." In particular, Mills has in mind issues revolving around race, but one can easily add related concepts, historical events, or phenomena such as racism, sexism, colonization, slavery, various types of objectification and denigration, political marginalization, economic exploitation (as women and/or people of color), and more.

In comparison to other fields, such as literature, sociology, or history, philosophy aspires to ask perennial questions. "Philosophy is supposed to be abstracting away from the contingent, the corporeal, the temporal, the material, to get at necessary, spiritual, eternal, ideal truth," writes Mills.⁴ From this perspective, the range of questions that fall into the domain of philosophy ought not to include those that lack broad appeal. Questions devoted to race and processes of racialization, therefore, are of limited relevance to "philosophers" on account of them being "local," particular, *too* corporeal (as it were), and mostly of interest to "minorities." It is not that white philosophers altogether lack interest in any of the above concerns. Instead, Mills's analysis centers on the way questions connected to

race or processes of racialization are considered “applied” issues, “special topics,” perhaps even “non-ideal theory,” or whatever term is used to confer peripheral, tangential, outlier-status as *not really philosophy*.

A major reason for this marginalization is the fact that the hegemonic group of individuals traditionally viewed as “philosophers” lack the range of perspective often shared by people of color. To make matters worse, this group also inhabits a position of racialized normativity. Using political philosophy as an example, Mills explains that the experiential starting point for people of color, generally speaking, runs contrary to the basic assumptions about political subjectivity maintained by many “mainstream” thinkers. He writes, “Your moral equality and personhood are certainly *not* recognized; you are *not* equal before the law; and the state is *not* seeking to protect but to encroach upon your interests in the interests of the white population.”⁵ In the context of the United States’s racial imaginary, African Americans are fundamentally viewed as criminal and dangerous; the existence of Latinx peoples is predicated on tropes of “illegality.” While the rights of Blacks, Hispanics, and even Native Americans (via treaty) might be protected nominally, these protections are not automatically granted in our society but must be continuously fought for and asserted, a point that gives new meaning to the idea of racial privilege. All this is to say, a metaphysically stable and legally secure political subjectivity is something philosophers can take for granted only when the class of individuals who make up professional philosophy are treated the same way by the law, show up in similar manners in terms of political representation, and also share the same normative concerns. Thus, when relying upon one’s (white racial) self as a frame of reference for discussion of rights or political organization, it is quite possible that, in academic contexts with other philosophers who share the same racialized starting point, the particularity of your view is obscured and the experience of “unraced” whites becomes the norm, as Mills puts it.

I offer the question of political justice as it relates to undocumented immigrants or irregular migration as another example. At the onset of *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls, arguably the most important political philosopher in the twentieth century, writes that his main object of inquiry is justice, the basic structure of society.⁶ Seeking a simple conception of justice, Rawls limits his project in two ways (one of which is important here): “I shall be satisfied if it is possible to formulate a reasonable conception of justice for the basic structure of society conceived for the time being as a closed system isolated from other societies.”⁷ In *The Law of Peoples*, he adds “this position views society as closed: persons enter only by birth, and exit only by death.”⁸ In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls continues: “That a society is closed is a considerable abstraction, justified only because it enables us to speak about certain main questions free from *distracting details*.”⁹ Besides viewing the plight of undocumented peoples in places like the United States as a “distracting detail,” Rawls’s restriction betrays his own principles by providing too much information regarding the persons behind the famed “veil of ignorance.” When formulating the basic principles upon which the structure

of society will depend, we may not know if we are rich, poor, Black, white, able-bodied or not, male or female, gay or straight, but we *do* know that everyone behind the veil will be a citizen or, at the very least, have regular status. Through this restriction Rawls limits justice, *in its most basic form*, to those who are formal members of the body politic, a move that alienates upwards of twelve million undocumented people from the basic structure of society (i.e., justice). Unless such a limitation is justifiable, which is to say that the burden is upon Rawlsians to show how this is not an arbitrary starting point for a theory of justice (again, appealing to Rawls’s own standards), how can the range of justice, *in its most basic form*, be so narrow?

My goal is not to engage the burgeoning literature on the ethics of immigration when I ask the above question—a question that many Rawlsians and political philosophers will dismiss as an instance in “non-ideal theory” (yet another means of downplaying the unique philosophical challenges posed by undocumented or irregular immigration). Instead, building upon Mills’s point, my goal is to demonstrate how many of the assumptions that “mainstream” philosophy depends upon, like taking citizenship (or, even more abstractly, “membership”) for granted when constructing a theory of justice, reflect a rather particular perspective which shapes a specific set of normative concerns. Now, imagine this happening in the aggregate, adding things like prestige, the weight of tradition, and the “need for rigor” into the mix. One can easily see how many of those intellectual endeavors that might attract and welcome more nonwhite people into philosophy—and, again, this is not to say that philosophers of color are *only* interested in “projects of color,” so to speak—are jettisoned (I am tempted to say “deported”) to ethnic studies, area studies, women and gender studies, etc.

It is important to underscore that it is not merely the numerical overrepresentation of whites that leads to the alienation of minorities in philosophy. Mills’s ultimate concern is with gate-keeping methodological constraints and “border-building” tactics that simultaneously curtail the diversification of philosophy as well as obscure *the particularity* of those concerns by passing themselves off as “universal.” Through this process, professional philosophy remains overpopulated by white people (men in particular) and dominated by white interests passing themselves off as race-less philosophical concerns. To put it differently, if philosophy is the “science of thought,” as a “science” it depends on a particular method. Such method does not come from nowhere but is produced by specific philosophers in particular places and points in time. In the context of professional academic philosophy, this means students are asked to speak, write, and think in ways that historically make sense within a methodological context articulated predominantly by dead white men.

Indeed, as one can probably realize, there is no such thing as an objective, impartial “view from nowhere,” a point that sets up quite an interesting predicament: either way one goes about it, one cannot avoid philosophizing from a *particularized* perspective; it is either yours or that of the dominant point of view passing itself off as *universal*. I ask, why not choose to be *you* when you philosophize?

LIBERATING PHILOSOPHY: ON WHY I FAST PHILOSOPHICALLY

For many individuals attempting to philosophize from racialized identities, philosophy can (and should) mean so much more than the above. At the very least, it should help liberate the mind as well as the body. Problem is, the former is typically viewed as exclusive to philosophy, the locus of our freedom and volition (if such things exist), while the latter is obviously important, but a contingent and accidental fact about you. For racialized “minorities,” however, seemingly adding new significance to Glaucon’s argument in *The Republic* that the semblance of being a good person is more important than actually *being* good, one cannot take their corporeal existence lightly. How you look in the eyes of others can result in life or death. Unfortunately, as this essay explains, most academic philosophy takes place from a perspective of great privilege, where how one appears or looks to others is irrelevant (and, moreover, *should* be irrelevant when it comes to philosophy). The kinds of questions that philosophers ask (i.e., “big questions”) take for granted a philosophical subjectivity that is more or less secure. Freedom of mind, thought, and conscience are prerequisite and assumed outright. For women, racial minorities, colonized peoples (and those whose sense of self begins from a position of oppression) such a starting point is a luxury. To think from these perspectives means one cannot help but use philosophy *for the sake of freedom*.

Think about it in terms of hunger. When you are hungry all you can do is think about food (the stuff of Snickers commercials). Once you are satiated, when you have eaten, then you are capable of entertaining and contemplating abstract philosophical questions (those about God, life, death, good and bad, etc.). Philosophy, to continue with this metaphor, often begins from the point of view of persons stuffed to the gills! To philosophize in a way where *you* matter, the racialized and gendered *you*, means that one uses philosophy such that it resembles “the love of wisdom,” but more so in terms of how wisdom sets us free from misguided and hubristic ways of knowing. Along these lines, in “The Liberating Function of Philosophy,” an essay that has become an important point of departure for much of my work, Ellacuría writes,

We can say that philosophy has always had to do with freedom, though in different ways. It has been assumed that philosophy is the task of free individuals and free peoples, free at least of the basic needs that can suppress the kind of thinking we call philosophy. We also acknowledge that it has a liberating function for those who philosophize and that as the supreme exercise of reason, it has liberated people from obscurantism, ignorance, and falsehood. Throughout the centuries, from the pre-Socratics to the Enlightenment, through all methods of *critical* thinking, we have ascribed a great superiority to reason, and to philosophical reason in particular, as a result of its liberating function.

He continues, “[T]his matter of *philosophy* and *freedom* gets to the fundamental purpose of philosophical knowledge,

which even if it is understood as a search for truth, cannot be reduced to being a search for truth for its own sake.”¹⁰ We should appreciate philosophy for its liberatory potential.

How is this liberatory potential cut short when sexual, racial, and political oppression are not viewed as proper or “traditional” philosophical topics? Moreover, given that philosophy as a discipline seemingly thrives when written in the guise of dialogues, how is this field needlessly restrained when it delineates the range of perspective to sanctified, hegemonic perspectives that speak on behalf of all of humanity?

While philosophy might survive in the above described ways, it surely will not thrive. In addition to its institutionalized formulations, philosophy must shift from an erudite “love of wisdom,” a benchmark on the register of Western civility, to a process in which “the *telos* of thinking, if there is any, is the struggle against dehumanization, understood as the affirmation of sociality and the negation of its negation [coloniality],” to quote Nelson Maldonado-Torres.¹¹ That is to say, philosophy is not an end in itself but part of the struggle against multiple forms of dehumanization and oppression. It is the affirmation of sociality and the denial of antisocial behavior. Philosophy ought not only to free one from misuses of reason or the type of intellectual laziness from which all humans suffer, but it also should be used to liberate ourselves from the types of intellectual nonage imposed by social injustice, racial and gendered totalization, and oppression. In using philosophy to think about the particularities of human existence, we should philosophize as hungry persons. Again, I ask, how are *you* (i.e., the person you are, your identity, your race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality) relevant to philosophy?

I conclude with the prayer, as he refers to it, Frantz Fanon uses to end *Black Skin, White Mask*: “O my body, always make of me a man who questions!”¹² I find these words to be hauntingly bothersome and yet extremely fascinating and important. I am bothered by them not because I dislike this statement. Being a man of color in professional academic philosophy, I often find myself often repeating Fanon’s prayer as a mantra. This passage is perplexing, however, because it comes at the end of a book devoted to thinking through the significance of the Black body, in a way that sees it burdened by negative valuations and internalized displeasure. To paraphrase what Fanon writes at the onset of *The Wretched of the Earth*, decolonization results in a new humanism, a novel social order, one in which the relations of domination that define the meaning of “white” and “Black” today are destroyed and constructed anew; the replacement of one species of humankind with another. Along these lines, the above prayer signifies Fanon’s attempt at finding value in his Black body in the midst of a world that devalues it. In these words, Fanon recognizes his Black body as enabling philosophical reflection, just the type of attitude towards race and processes of racialization I advocate for in this essay.

Nevertheless, for one’s body to become the source of philosophical skepticism, it has to inhabit the site of social exclusion. It has to bear the mark of difference and run against the racial, gender, and sexual normativity of

one's social structure. If not "different," one will not be afforded the looks, the bewilderment, the fear, the gaze that generates the level of self-awareness leading to the type of questioning that Fanon is grateful for. Along these lines, I, too, am grateful for being different (especially in philosophy, to say the least). Being a nonwhite Latino, I recall (as a child, mind you) the feeling and shame of not being "American." Although I was born in the United States and hold US citizenship, I distinctively remember thinking that if you closed your eyes and pictured the ideal "American," a brown-skinned boy from the east side of Los Angeles would not be the first picture that came to mind. The American imaginary remains thoroughly racialized, gendered, regionalized (say, coming from the Midwest or East Coast), linguistically impoverished (that is, monolingual), overly Christian, and heterosexual (and I'm sure there is more). Being Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx, whichever one prefers, allowed me the epistemic vantagepoint to question what it means to be "American," a citizen of the United States. For me, membership is not something I take lightly.

And yet, for such a proclivity to questioning to be possible, the racial normativity that accompanies white supremacy had to have come into effect (and this is where I am bothered by Fanon's words). I often worry about those times in which whiteness or white supremacy becomes necessary, where we find some meaning in the existence of whiteness. Here, this worry about constructing a theodicy for whiteness is inspired by what Aimé Césaire writes in *Discourse on Colonialism*: "[B]etween colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance; that out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up, out of all the memoranda that have been dispatched by all the ministries, there could not come a single human value."¹³ For these reasons, my nonwhite body *should not* be the means through which I approach philosophy. However, it is, and as such, my approach to philosophy does not end with enlightenment, but liberation.

NOTES

1. This essay is an abridged version of "Why Philosophy Does Not (And Should Not) Happen in a Vacuum" (in review). An early version of it was published in *The Write News: The Write Attitude Newsletter*, Spring 2017, Issue 8, 9–11. Elements of the last section draw from Grant J. Silva, "The Americas Seek not Liberation but Enlightenment," *The Pluralist* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 1–21.
2. Charles Mills, "Philosophy Race. Philosophy Erased," in *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*, George Yancy, ed. (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 45.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 60.
5. Ibid., 61.
6. John Rawls, *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1971), 3.
7. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 6–7. Rawls's second limitation is that he wishes to "examine the principles of justice that would regulate a well-ordered society." He continues, "Everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions" (8). This is called "strict compliance theory," an idea that has generated a comprehensive academic literature. In fact, most Rawlsian literature explores the question of whether or not a well-ordered society implies that people share common conceptions of the good, and whether or not people would behave justly if presented with the opportunity to do so.

8. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2001), 26.
 9. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 12 (emphasis added).
 10. Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Liberating Function of Philosophy (1985)," in *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation*, Michael E. Lee, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 94.
 11. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Thinking at the Limits of Philosophy," in *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*, George Yancy, ed. (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 261.
 12. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 206.
 13. Aimé Césaire, "Discourse on Colonialism," trans. Joan Pickham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 11–12.
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